

Fortnightly Sermon

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DOING AND KNOWING

I.

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DOING AND KNOWING.

I.

"If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the teaching."
—John vii, 17.

Long and often may we rejoice in this great saying of the Master. It is one of the two or three of his sayings which reach deepest down into the moral and spiritual life.

The scene of it is at Jerusalem at one of the festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus stood in the temple and taught. Many persons who listened, wondered, and said, "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" Which is to say, "How is this man able to expound aught, never having been taught by the Rabbins, and having no warrant from them?" Jesus answered "My teaching is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God or whether I speak from myself." Which is to say, "I have not been taught by learned men, it is true, but I have a voice or teaching in my soul, from God; and any man may have the same; for whoever will do the will of God, therewith knows the things of God." Or thus I may express it, "Whoso wills to do the will of God, shall know what is the will of God;" which is to say, "Whoso loves the right with singleness of heart, soon shall know the right."

This is a deep saying, nor ever has been said any deeper one concerning the moral center of the soul, that it is the abode of knowledge and the source of our ability to understand; in other words, that as the race is not to swift feet nor the battle to strong bodies, so knowledge is not to be obtained, like a stormed city, by mighty minds; no, but he only whose heart and life is

right shall know things as truly they are. By right heart and right life is meant this, a single-hearted love for the truth and desire for it, and a conforming of the behaviour to it so soon or so far as it be found.

This deep saying of the Master contains, then, the statement of the relation of morals to knowledge, and declares that knowledge rests on morals.

Now, knowledge may be taken in two kinds—

1. To know anything simply as a fact, that it is so and not otherwise. This I may call the religious form or manner of knowledge; for religion takes simply the fact as it is, and beholds the infinite power therein, and the eternal unfolding of it, with awe and faith.

2. To know anything in its principles, causes, relations, classifications, to comprehend, analyse and describe it. This I may call the intellectual form or manner of knowledge, wherein not merely the soul takes it with reverence but the intellect seizes on it to explore it.

Therefore, knowledge being of these two kinds, the Master's saying, which declares morals to be the root of knowledge, brings morals into relation with these two kinds of knowledge. This is to say that simple goodness (which the text calls the simple willing to do the will of God) underlies the religious apprehension of the facts which surround us, and also the intellectual comprehension of those facts. Or I may state it briefly thus—Simple faithfulness is the source of pure religious experience, and also of intellectual understanding.

In this sermon I shall speak only of the first part, pertaining to religious experience; in another, of the second part, the intellectual.

Here then is my subject in this sermon, namely, the relation of morals, that is, of simple dutifulness of heart and life, to religious experience.

Of course this is a wide subject, and a philosophic or abstract and theoretical subject, if so one please to treat it. Starting from this point, I might set forth on any one of very many paths of thought. But my whole purpose now is to say one thing clearly, one very great and valuable truth, namely, that religious experience, whether in thinking or feeling, comes

to naught, and often is worse than naught, an excitement, a gross deception or a more gross self-deception, unless it be founded deep in moral earnestness and a pure heart. But when the moral center is sound, the will earnest, desire noble, we shall find the earth very good soil for us, and the natural growth of it will be religion in the soul,—religious thought and religious feeling too, noble, beautiful, and sincere together.

Consider first the ease with which religious emotion may be excited. It is produced easily always. So easily indeed may a certain religious emotion, even unto ecstasy or frenzy, be produced, that very often, and I know not but commonly in assemblies, it rather is made and concocted by putting together and stirring up the materials of it, and roused thus by art into a kind of combustion,—rather thus it is *made*, I say, than springs up by nature, with the gentle and lovely fervor of nature's works in the soul. This is the profanity of revivals; and indeed I hold the revival meetings held by many churches and sects to be very profane; for the aim should not be to have them, but to need them not; and they should not be called the fruit of the Holy Spirit now, but the dire fermentations of the fruits of an evil spirit in the past loose and unholy days. Sad or profane is it thereupon to stir public heats of religious exultation, which flame up and go out, instead of hidden quietudes of penitence and resolve, which remain. And oh! how lightly then, and profanely, do they cast about from mouth to mouth the most hallowed thoughts, the most holy names, the most sacred experiences of the soul; which seems to me impious. We shall have indeed, as we must, our special seasons of feeling the love of God, says Theodore Parker, and "our several ways of expressing it." But "unhappy is the man or woman who tattles thereof, foaming at the mouth in some noisy conference, as in a village dog barks to dog; but blessed is he whose noiseless piety sweetens his daily toil, filling the house with the odor of that ointment; thrice blessed when it comes out in the character of the men whose holy lives, glistening with good deeds, adorn the land they also serve and heal and bless." Sometimes these sudden combustions of emotion as to religion do good, Parker avers, but commonly more evil. "Many thoughtful and moral men are disgusted with the folly and rant, and turn with contempt

from everything that bears the name of religion; and the most painful forms of infidelity and atheism are sure to come,—a lack of confidence in any higher law, in a creating Cause and preserving Providence that guides the world.” Heats and wrangling flames of religion, he says again, sometimes rebuke certain vices and passions; and it is well, lacking a nobler way, that “by the iron knout of fear these should be scourged into subjection.” “But alas!” he says, “worse vices—the lust of money, of power, of distinction, the vices of old men, men of hard heads and stony hearts, spiritual pride, self-conceit, arrogance, bigotry, hate,—these are left in full strength.”

Religious emotions, like all unpainful feelings, are pleasures, and these may become excessive luxury, indulgence, intoxication. They yield a passing excitation, or a soothing which too often is but a blunting of the moral judgment. There appear natures to whom religious contemplation becomes like the idle luxury of a dream, fanned, as in the old Grecian idea of heaven, with western zephyrs of soft feeling and a delicious waiting upon half-born aspirations which die at once. By such flushes of feeling a pleasurable glow is spread over the body and soul, but promoting no high thoughts, nor ending in noble deeds.

Moreover, our experience of nature and life, unless true moral earnestness unite therewith, tends subtly to arouse inefficient emotion in religion. Joys, prosperities, sorrows, pain, evil, helplessness, weariness, overwork, the beauty, benevolence, power and grandeur of the Universe, conspire to evoke emotion. These, indeed, are wise and loving appeals to our religious nature. But unless the sense of right be alive in us and duty be mighty, these attractions and influences will cradle us but not glorify us.

So easy is emotion in religion, so pleasurable, so feasible!

But it is just contrariwise with the moral nature. *This* is not enticed forth; *this* is not a play and lapping of glowing emotions; *this* is not an easy run-forth of pleasure and exultation. Morality is exercise and drill. The moral force is resisted continually, is fallen on, and not seldom overthrown, by passions, open or ambushed, by desires, ambitions, seductions, low standards in life,—a host of enemies and temptations; and

never the moral nature prevails without energy, often not without battle,—not seldom a conflict long and severe. Right living indeed has been called immemorially a battle. “Gird ye to the battle,” “Quit ye like men, be strong,” “Put on the whole armor of God,” these are the precepts of the prophets. It is no little hard thing even to do no evil; yet this is but a poor virtue. But to do good, to sacrifice ourselves for mankind, to constrain ourselves for the world’s sake, to live a large domain of our lives for others, to bear much and keep a sweet cheer in the face and faith in the heart, to be poor and not be envious, to be neglected and not grow suspicious or bitter, to stand against ridicule, to inquire what we ought to live for, and go about life with earnest purpose to make beauty and love of it, and do this day by day, steadily, unswerved, for long years while reward is deferred and difficulties multiply and the long pressing weight of them grows very heavy—this is very hard indeed, this is a great battle. Therefore it is that moral greatness is so very great, because it is achieved against so much resistance; for then strength is the price of victory and still more strength the fruit of it.

Even in the life of the body there seems to be somewhat like to this moral life which grows strong by resistance overcome. A great physician once grew very eloquent to me about the resistance which continually exercises the body and thereby makes it live. Observe, he said, that the forces of nature and our external conditions, when once life mysteriously springs in them, all seem hostile to life, and so foster it to lift and bear itself against resistance. How grows the power and compactness of the muscles of the arm? By no other way then by exercise, which is the tug of the muscle against a resistance. So grows all vital power whatever. A thousand destructive agents, mixed with the air and with food, compounded by the very processes of the body and by every appliance of social existence, continually exercise physical life. Life thereon gains its very energy from the effort put forth in throwing off poisons. Life, said the physician, is inconceivable if there were naught for it to do to maintain itself. It is like a strong warrior, possible only when there are enemies. So grows it and so enlarges, till its natural cycle and course be run, and it stands atop of its career and of its force. Then begin the foes gradually to prevail. They

overcome the present shell of life, and wear it out. The soft death of old age results, and all is peace and passage. So is the moral life also. There are contesting poisons in its atmosphere by which it is exercised to grow. A moral life with naught to do to maintain itself, is inconceivable. But a host of appetites troop in to do it battle. Often the battle is hard; but the strength of every foe overcome passes into virtue of the will.

Now is it not plain that this noble acquisition, this victory which is true moral character, must underly religious feeling if that be to be lifted and sanctified? Without the moral conquest, what else can emotion be but indulgence, pleasure, sensation? What right have we, or what dignity, to enter joys and hopes and trust which have no moral endeavor, no noble war of will, under them? If there be no devoutness of will, no moral earnestness, religious feeling is dissipation.

Here, then, I find the first depth in the Master's words, "If ye will do the will of God, ye shall know of the teaching." The religious life rests, for its truthful uplift of feeling on the moral life; because emotion in religion may come and go as easily as a chattering concourse of birds; but right living is a noble battle. The thought of God, and all the joy, hope, trust, faith, love, that therewith arise, are to be known as their true nature is, and entered into in very truth, only as we will to do the Holy and Eternal Will.

The glory of the Universe of God is a holy glory. It is truth and truthfulness, right and righteousness. Glorious and beautiful are the heavens and the earth, "like a flag unfurled,"

"The splendor of the morning sky
And all the stars in company!"

But "my soul says, 'There is more than this!'" Beautiful are the shapes and colors of forest and field; but it is a holiness of beauty which "has pulled around itself the bark of every tree." God is seen in greatest glory in the faithfulness of his creatures. The love and obedience of a dog—that inextinguishable worship—has more glory in it than the Milky Way, and is a visibility of God more distinct than mountains. The murmurous invincible trust of a lion once gained by kindness, the appealing sorrow of a polar bear whose cub has been killed, are more sweet than the

rhythm of the sea, and an audibility of God more distinct than "the music of the spheres." And one deed of pure self-sacrifice, of moral warfare, in a man, affords us a greater beholding and hearing of God than all the poems of Bibles and all the geological "scriptures writ in stone." Says Fichte in his "Way to the Blessed Life," "God appears in what a good man does, lives and loves. No longer then is the Eternal encompassed by shadows nor hidden by a garment, but is visible in his own immediate life. We ask 'What is God?' and the question is unanswerable from empty and imaginary conceptions; but in the life of a good man the answer is given, 'God is that which a devout creature of his, thereby inspired by him, does.'"

In a passage of singular beauty and elevation, John Weiss has the same great thought: "In a visit to scenes where grandeur is clothed with charm, and all the elements of a perfect landscape appeal to all the senses, I must confess that I have been impressed with some moral attributes of humble persons, notwithstanding the importunities of Nature. There is a place where the mountains escape directly from the ocean, to lift the eye into a wide horizon; yet they bare their bosoms to the surf, and flatter out of it fine rhythm for the ear. The slopes of old forests send down their green to compete with the waves. The caverns that have been gnawed out of the coast-line by the patience of thousands of years, attract the step away from the glens, where the shadows fall from old birches and needles of the pine. The paths that the ships make upon their various errands do not seduce the fancy to follow, any more than the tracks which the woodcutter has hewed through the wilderness of green. By both roads your delight travels from point to point, through spaces that are inhabited by constant surprises; and your heart learns to soar like the eagles that hint good omens to you from the heights on which their instinct launches them. You sail in their company, and are masters of the beauty of the land and sea. Their motion soothes your care, as the lapse of the mountain torrents that pass through you with murmur of forgetfulness of the heat of politics and all low things. Every nerve of your body learns in an instant to transmit such news as never flashes along the lines of the telegraph. And the gladness of your soul

is worship. For when the day is built upon a large scale, as it can be in regions where material enough is at hand to make a dozen landscapes, and more beauty than the whole dozen could afford, short of bankruptcy, the first and most jubilant thought of the mind is that God is making the world afresh for you, and has taken one of his splendid mornings to do it in, and is pronouncing through you that he finds it good. If your eyes fall before this frankness, and for relief you begin to pick the ground berries, they do not allay but stimulate your thirst for the sweetness of being at home with God, and you lift your face again with the whole lifting of the sea and the solemn mountains up to the divine countenance, to receive its morning kiss. It would be contemptible to undervalue such pure moments. But there is no treason in confessing that if one moral attribute come athwart such scenes, it throws them into shadow, and you are conscious that an invisible presence, a messenger of the love in which earth's grandeur was conceived, is passing by.

So I thought, when a boy, who had never seen the inside of school or meeting-house, had never read Paley's or Wayland's ethics, and did not know how far he lived from Boston, described to me how the foxes and raccoons made a beaten path in the snow, from the winter-stricken mountains, directly through his father's garden down to the seaside, to go foraging for waifs and strays; and that not one of the family ever thought of setting a trap in the way of their necessities, to make money out of their famine. What delicacy of the moral sense, nestled underneath that ragged jacket and that raggeder intelligence. The boy's father did not know enough to estimate the heights of the mountains where God's wild creatures lived, yet he had transmitted to his children the beauty of not taking advantage of a fox's hunger to stock his cottage with peltry. And my conscience rose to spring-tide with the conviction that the temple was not out of doors, but was underneath a jacket, and was not made with hands. Moral things are unobtrusive, and make as little noise as the light does in blushing on the mountain's forehead; but, like the light, they announce God's coming to take possession of the day."

